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1.0 Introduction

One of the primary goals of quantitative sociolinguistics has been to use the present to explain the past. In order to do this, sociolinguists have had to develop a set of analytical procedures that allow them to observe linguistic change as it is actually taking place. This 'synchronic approach' has been used quite frequently in the study of sound change (cf. Labov 1994), but it has been used much less often in the study of grammatical developments. Nevertheless, we suggest that this synchronic approach to grammatical change seems to be particularly appropriate for the study of grammaticalization (cf. Schwenter and Traugott 1994).

Recent developments in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) provide an ideal research site for exploring grammatical change in progress. As research on AAVE has broadened to include the speech of older rural African Americans as well as that of younger urban ones, sociolinguists have come to realize that several unique grammatical features of AAVE are not relics of an earlier creole but have emerged over the last fifty years or so. As a way of studying grammatical change in progress, this paper examines two of those features: the use of *be*+V-ing for habitual meaning, what we call *be*₂, and the use of *had* + simple past, what we call innovative *had* + past, which is used where other varieties of English use the simple past. The data for this examination come from two sources: an ethnolinguistic study of four generations of African Americans in the rural east-central Texas community of Springville (see Cukor-Avila 1995) and mechanically recorded interviews with former slaves made primarily in the 1930s and 1940s (see Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1991).¹ Taken together, these sources give us linguistic evidence from real and apparent time that spans 130 years.²

2.0 The Grammaticalization of *be*₂

The use of an uninflected *be* (as in *They be wavin', you know, doin' their hands and stuff like that*) is among the most widely recognized characteristics of AAVE. Early work on AAVE noted that this uninflected *be* (often called invariant *be* or *be*₂) was used to mark habitual aspect (see Fasold 1972). Because *be*₂ was so different from anything in white vernaculars and because Caribbean creoles often mark habitual aspect, some linguists argued that *be*₂ was most likely a relexification of an earlier creole form (see Dillard 1972). Much of the early work on AAVE, however, was based largely on the speech of children and teenagers, and with one exception (Wolfram 1974), all of it was done in Northern urban areas -- areas where large African American populations had developed only since World War II. In other words, in the early stages of work on AAVE, inferences about the historical development of that variety were made on the basis of the speech of children in areas that historically had not had large African American populations.

As researchers began to explore the AAVE used by older adults and rural residents, data which challenged the hypothesis that *be*₂ was a relexification of a creole feature began to emerge. Bailey and Maynor (1987, 1989), for example, found that *be*₂ occurred less frequently among older adults than among children,

adolescents, and younger adults and that it had a strikingly different syntactic and semantic distribution. Among elderly adults in urban areas and rural residents in general, *be*₂ appeared before all types of predicates (that is, before *V+ing*, locatives, adjectives, and NPs) with roughly equal frequency and without semantic restriction. Examples (1) through (8), taken from interviews with a male born in 1917, illustrate the wide syntactic and semantic distribution of *be*₂:

- (1) That be a row here and tha's a row there.
- (2) Tha's a piece of land over there where be a turn row betwixt it.
- (3) They [chicken snakes] just be knotted up when they suck eggs.
- (4) And May used to be the wet part of the year; it don' be now.
- (5) Well, it don't be too many [thunderstorms] right around here.
- (6) We hear tell in different places be, be storms.
- (7) [If you] be sick and they wash your clothes they still want to pay for it.
- (8) He be full [right now].

In examples (1) and (2), for instance, *be* occurs before an NP; in (7) and (8) it occurs before adjectives. In (3) and (7) it is used for habitual actions; in (1) and (8) it is used for actions at one point in time. These uses of *be* are quite different from the uses reported for children, adolescents, and young adults. Among these groups, most of the instances of *be* have habitual meaning, and most of them occur before *V+ing*, as examples (9) and (10) illustrate:

- (9) Sometimes them big boys be throwin' the ball.
- (10) They be doin' the breakin' durin' PE and durin' class time.

What these differences between earlier and more recent varieties of AAVE suggest is that *be*₂ has become increasingly restricted syntactically to a position before *V+ing* and semantically to a function as an habitual marker. Like contemporary AAVE, earlier AAVE had an invariant *be*, but in earlier AAVE it was simply an alternate form used in place of *am*, *is*, and \emptyset without any syntactic or semantic restrictions (*are* was extremely rare in earlier AAVE and is still uncommon). Over the last half century, this invariant *be* has become restricted to 'progressives' that have durative or habitual meaning. Figure 1 illustrates this development. Among the oldest people in the corpus (those born before 1945), *be*₂ accounts for only 6% of the progressive tokens with durative/habitual meaning; among adults born between 1950 and 1965, it accounts for half of the tokens. Among children and adolescents, *be*₂ comprises more than three quarters of the progressive tokens with durative habitual meaning; further, more than three quarters of the tokens of *be*₂ occur before *V+ing*.

The motive for the grammaticalization of *be*₂ seems to lie in the messiness of the English progressive system and the lack of a clear relationship between form and function for present tense forms of *be* in early AAVE. Comrie (1976) notes that English progressives can be used for a number of meanings other than actions in progress. For instance, they can be used with future meaning (*I'm leaving Monday*), with habitual meaning (*I'm jogging every day this spring*), and for continuous actions (*I'm getting slower every day*). Early AAVE shows no tendency to use one form of *to be* as opposed to another for these different meanings. In fact, in early AAVE there is no one-to-one relationship between form and function for any of the forms of *to be* except for *am* (which is almost always used for first person singular). *Is* and \emptyset alternate in both the third singular and

plurals (with their use constrained in part by whether or not the subject is an NP or a pronoun [see Bailey, Maynor, and Cukor-Avila 1989] and in part by the following predicate [see Rickford 1992]), *be* alternates with all three of the other forms. In early AAVE, then, the progressive signaled a wide range of meanings, as it does in other varieties of English, and except for *am*, the forms of *to be* used in the progressive had no unique function associated with them.

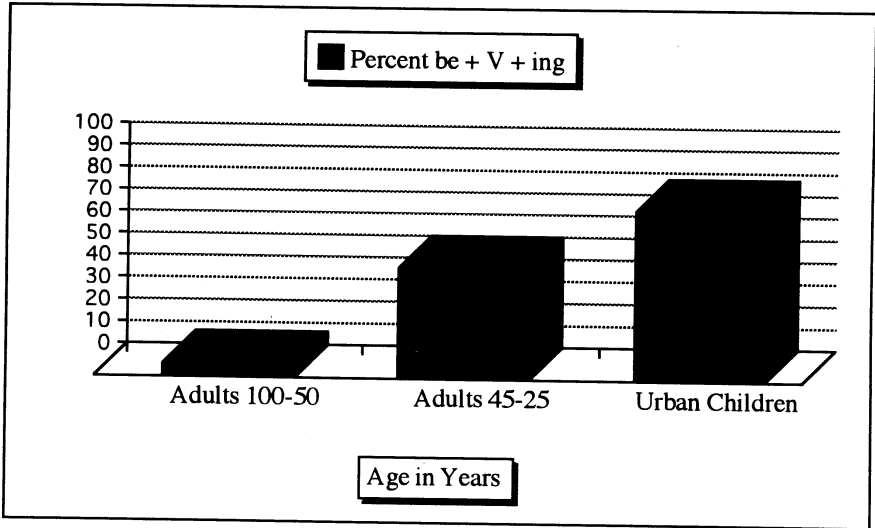


Figure 1. *be* + V+*ing* as a Percentage of all Progressives with Durative/Habitual Meaning (after Bailey 1993)

What has happened over the last half century is that this mismatch between form and function has in part been resolved as *be* has been grammaticalized to signal progressives (i.e., to positions before V+*ing*) that have habitual and durative meanings. Among young adults and children, then *be*₂ is used for habitual/durative actions, *is*, \emptyset , and *am* for true progressives. Although *is* and \emptyset are used in both the singular and plural of the third person (unlike *am*, which is restricted to first person), these forms are constrained by both the preceding subject and the following predicate. Along with the development of *gonna* as a future, the grammaticalization of *be*₂ creates a more optimal relationship between form and function for both the progressive subsystem and the present tense of *be* in AAVE.

One question that arises here, however, is why *be*₂ was the form reanalyzed to represent durative/habitual actions. The trigger for this reanalysis probably lies with a second kind of invariant *be* that occurred in earlier AAVE. Earlier AAVE included widespread deletion of *would*, and when *would* deletion occurred before *be*, it left an invariant *be* as in *When I was a girl, we be picking cotton every fall*. Because *would* is one of two ways of marking past habitual action in English (*used to*, of course, is the other), the deletion of *would* before *be* left an invariant *be* that marked past habitual action, as in the example above. This invariant *be* that derives from *would* deletion is thus quite similar to *be*₂ in contemporary urban AAVE

except that the former refers to past actions. It is an easy step, of course, for the earlier invariant *be* that results from *would* deletion to trigger the use *be*₂ for present habitual actions. Bailey's 1993 examination of the development of *be*₂ over time suggests three stages in the development of this habitual *be*. In the first stage, the stage represented by most of the older adults in the corpus, *be*₂ is simply an alternative form of the *am/is/Ø* with no specialized function. During this stage it coexists with a second kind of invariant *be* derived from *would* deletion. In the second stage, *be*₂ takes on habitual meaning perhaps by analogy with invariant *be* from *would* deletion. Examples (11) through (14), which come from an interview with a female resident of Bryan, Texas, born in 1937, illustrate this stage. In stage two, however, *be*₂ still occurs before a variety of predicates. In the third stage, *be*₂ becomes restricted syntactically to positions before *V+ing*, as in examples (15) through (21) below which come from a woman born in 1945:³

- (11) Really, you be more partial to them [grandchildren] than to your own.
- (12) I found in fast food restaurants people be dirty sometimes.
- (13) Some of the girls wear them [boots] and they be turned down . . . high-heeled boots, they be turned flat.
- (14) FW: What causes those allergies?
INF: Well, all the growth and everything you be around.
- (15) FW: I always get up at 6:30.
INF: So Randy be getting in the bed [when] you be get up.
- (16) [When] we was working at night, we be watching a cute little guy come in.
- (17) . . . 'cause we be going to bingo [every week].
- (18) She be sitting up there [at work] and she be kerplunk.
- (19) . . . some went to \$23 a month that she be getting here.
- (20) [They] be fighting like R. and P.
- (21) I be doing those doctors [cleaning their offices].

Thus invariant *be*, which was once a lexical variant used anywhere *am*, *is*, and *Ø* could be used, has become grammaticalized to serve as a marker of durative/habitual meaning in the progressive system. As it has become grammaticalized, its syntactic distribution has become increasingly restricted. The context for this grammaticalization was the messiness of the English progressive system and the lack of a clear relationship between form and function in the present tense of *be* in early AAVE. The immediate trigger for the grammaticalization was the presence of a second kind of invariant *be*, one that results from *would* deletion and that signals past habituality. The end product is a kind of sorting out of the relationship between form and function.

3.0 The Grammaticalization of *had* + past

The use of innovative *had* + past in AAVE represents a similar sorting out of the relationships between form and function.⁴ Traditionally in English the past perfect has been used to express a situation that occurred prior to another past action, a type of 'past in the past' (for example, *Betty had already served dinner when we arrived at the party*). The relatively infrequent use of this form in speech is due to the fact that in the majority of instances events expressed in the past perfect can also be expressed using the simple past, except when a speaker wishes to convey a specific

chronological ordering of events. Our data show that over the last half century there has been a reanalysis of both the form and the function of the past perfect in the speech of our informants. The reanalysis of the past perfect is coupled with the increase in the use of this form, as is shown generationally in Figures 2 and 3, this being a direct result of its expansion from backgrounded to foregrounded discourse contexts (Hopper and Thompson 1980).

Earlier descriptions of AAVE by Labov et al. (1968) and Labov (1972) and Wolfram and Fasold (1974) note that the past perfect is used frequently in this dialect and that its construction, more often than not, resembles the form *had* + simple past rather than *had* + past participle. While both of these research teams have accurately described the form of the past perfect in AAVE, they have neglected to take into account its function at the level of discourse. Labov and Wolfram and Fasold noticed that the past perfect was primarily used in narrative style yet neither study investigated the semantic functions of its use in this context. Likewise, the majority of innovative *had* + past constructions in the Springville data are found in narrative contexts. Since by definition, narrative clauses already refer to events in the past in reference to speech time (Schiffrin 1981), the fact that urban AAVE speakers and rural AAVE speakers with urban ties are using the past perfect frequently in this context suggests some type of reanalysis of the function of this form; therefore, in order to distinguish this form from the traditional past perfect, we refer to the reanalyzed form as innovative *had* + past. Table 1 below illustrates the distribution in discourse of all *had* + past constructions for a representative group of Springville informants. The data show that the discourse distribution of innovative *had* + past favors its use in narrative constructions, the highest proportion of which are found in orientation clauses.

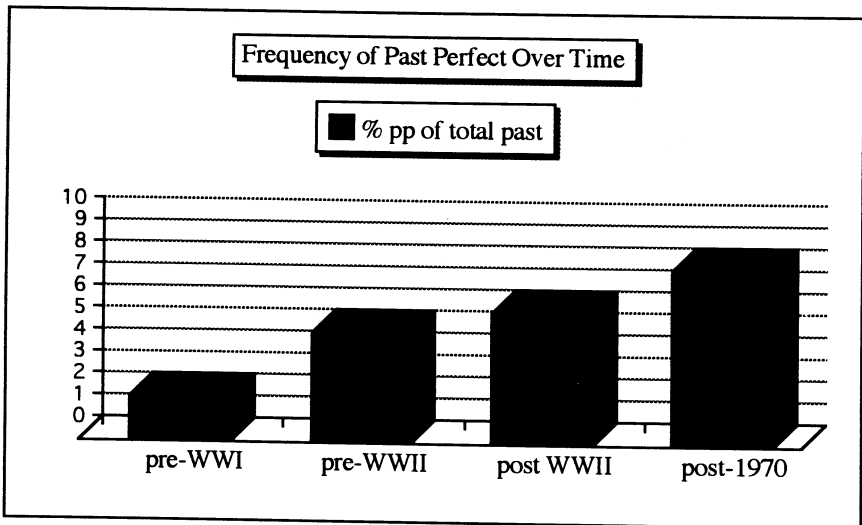


Figure 2. Past Perfect as the Percentage of Total Past Over Time

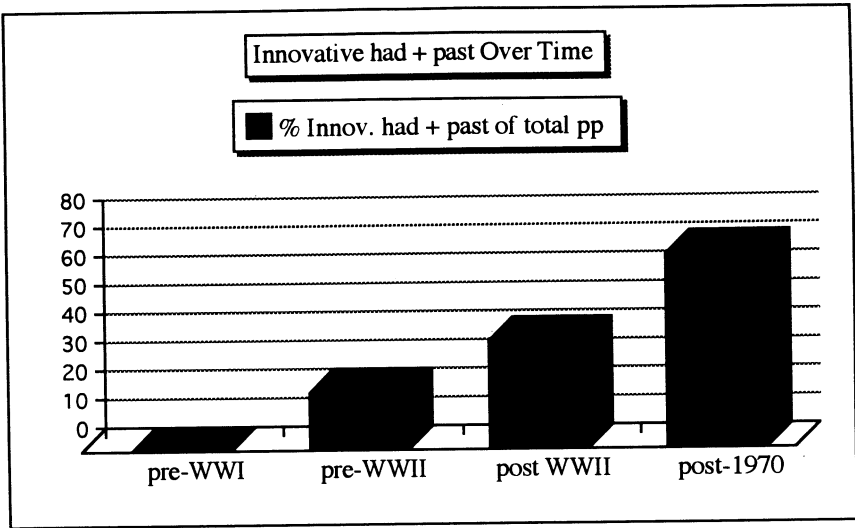


Figure 3. Innovative *had + past* as a Percentage of Total Past Perfect Over Time

Table 1

Discourse Distribution of Innovative *had + past*
Constructions in the Speech of Springville Residents

Speaker	orientation clause	complicating action	single event*	listing*
Brandy (b. 1982)	6	5	2	
Sheila (b. 1979)	11	8	7	12
Lamar (b. 1976)	4			
Travis (b. 1965)		6	1	
Vanessa (b. 1961)	13	7	7	
Elsie (b. 1939)	6	2	2	
TOTAL	40	28	19	12

*Listing and single event occurrences are outside of narrative clauses.

Orientation clauses usually precede complicating action clauses, or the actual telling of the narrative, and serve to 'identify in some way the time, place, persons, and their activity or the situation' (Labov 1972: 364). These clauses differ from other narrative clauses in that they typically express resultative notions by reporting on existing states which are not temporally ordered, or extended processes which may begin before the narrative action itself and continue during that action

(Schiffrin 1981: 48). Hopper and Thompson's (1980) distinction between foregrounded and backgrounded events is relevant here since orientation clauses provide background information, which is not temporally ordered within the narrative, and occurs prior to the actual sequence of events described in complicating action clauses, which relate more foregrounded information.

Examples (22) and (23) illustrate the use of innovative *had* + past in orientation clauses. In example (22), Vanessa's use of *had* + past suggests that she views the events of 'becoming friends' and the manager 'calling her her sister' not as sequenced events, but as a result of some other action, perhaps the fact that they worked together a lot and got along so well. In this brief orientation section to a much longer narrative, Vanessa is offering background information, in essence 'setting the scene' for the rest of the narrative. Additionally, there is no explicit reference point stated in conjunction with the use of these forms. Instead there is an implied reference time which is the beginning of the actions that comprise the narrative. As speakers expand the use of *had* + past into contexts where there is no past reference point, either explicit or implied, we can assume that *had* + past is no longer functioning in its traditional role and that it is has taken on a new function in the dialect. In both examples (22) and (23), then, innovative *had* + past functions as a type of remote past signaling that the events described occurred prior to the telling of the narrative. Dahl (1985: 147) reports that the past perfect used to signal past temporal frames is the first step towards a situation where they are used as a general remote past.

- (22) Vanessa (b. 1961)
- a. When I was workin' at Billups
 - b. me an' the manager we had became real good friends
 - c. an' so she had started callin' me her sister.
 - d. So I liked workin' there
 - e. because uh, we did the work together.
 - f. We made it easy for each other.
 - g. An' jus' because she was the manager
 - h. she didn' put everything off on us.
 - i. It was mostly like me an' her work together an' do everything.
- (23) Vanessa (b. 1961)
- a. Nuh uh, lemme tell you
 - b. what I did though Lucy.
 - c. You know on FM 2542
 - d. one day you had took me that road to go back to uh, Shiloh, remember?
 - e. I gon do the same thing one night you know.

The complicating action section of a narrative 'tells the story by relaying a series of temporally-ordered narrative events' (Schiffrin 1981: 48). These events are typically expressed in the simple past unless speakers wish to convey a change in the order of events, in which case the past perfect is used. Examples (24) and (25) illustrate the use of innovative *had* + past to describe narrative sequenced past events. It is clear that for both Travis and Sheila innovative *had* + past can be used to relate foregrounded events, in other words, where event time equals reference time. This is shown in example (24) where Travis relates a series of sequential actions (buying groceries, getting biscuits, and buying biscuits) that are not in

reference to any explicit past event, and in example (25) in Sheila's short narration of the events in the movie 'Child's Play.'

(24) Travis (b. 1963)

- a. Well we used to go at Piggly Wiggly.
- b. They said their stuff, you know, we
- c. my mama had bought some, some uh, groceries from them one time
- d. an' she had got some biscuits
- e. she had bought from them,
- f. an' it was, it was sour.
- g. So we jus' stopped, you know, tradin' over there.

(25) Sheila (b. 1979)

- a. This doll try to get into this boy body.
- b. An' then they had killed him at the en' of it.

As the use of innovative *had* + past spreads from backgrounded to foregrounded speech contexts, and the past reference point associated with traditional past perfect usage is lost, speakers begin to use this form to express past events in non-narrative contexts as well. This is shown in examples (26) and (27) where innovative *had* + past is used to relate single events in the past. In example (26), Vanessa's use of *had tol'* indicates that sometime in the past Kelsey told her that she (Kelsey) had applied for a job at Daylight Donuts. What is interesting about Vanessa's response in this short dialog is that she uses the simple past in the subordinate clause, rather than the past perfect which would have been the more likely choice in light of traditional uses of this construction. (That is, *She tol' me she had put an application in* would imply that 'she told me she had applied for the job before she got it'). We can assume then that temporal ordering is not the reason for the use of innovative *had* + past; rather these examples suggest a function in which innovative *had* + past refers to an unspecified time that perhaps more remote than the immediate past. This is exemplified in Travis' comment in example (27). We had recorded Travis earlier that same day, and in our conversation he said that he liked to paint and had even sold some of his drawings. During our conversation later that afternoon with his younger brother Lamar, the subject of Travis' art work came up again, which prompted him to make the comment *I had told you all about my pictures*. The implied past reference point can only be the time of our present conversation, which would then put the time when Travis told us about his pictures somewhere in the remote past, in this case, during our previous conversation.

(26) Vanessa (b. 1961)

- V: So what you been doin'? I've seen Kelsey. She started back to school.
- L: Yeah. She's workin' at Daylight Donuts.
- V: Yeah she had tol' me she put an application in.
- L: Yeah I put in a application over there on Diamond Shamrock.
- V: You did?

(27) Travis (b. 1963)

- T: Uh, that big picture in the fron' room that goes all [L interrupts]
- L: See the school in back of there?

FW: Yeah, uh huh. It says Springville School. Yeah I'll go in in jus' a second an' check it out.

T: Yeah, I, I, I had told you all about my pictures.

FW: Yeah I know. I wanted to see your stuff. That's great.

Sheila is the only person listed in Table 1 who uses innovative *had* + past as a listing device for unsequenced events, making her the most advanced speaker in the Springville corpus in the use of this form. While the events she lists in example (28) appear to have some kind of order, those listed in example (29) are in no particular order; in fact, temporal order is irrelevant in this passage. She is simply listing a series of related, but unsequenced, past actions: walking around Springville, getting paper to use for grave rubbings, going around town picking up rocks, and going to Bonnie's house to take pictures. For the most advanced speakers in Springville, innovative *had* + past functions more like an alternative form to express events in the past rather than as a form to distinguish remote from more recent past.

(28) Sheila (b. 1979)

FW: You need to give Fred, you don', you don', you said you had a picture of him but it's not here?

L: Nuh uh. It's at my mom house. 'Cause we had went to -- one day my mom had took us out to eat. We had went to, to go eat. Then we had went to the mall, then we had went to Quick As A Flash. An' he paid for the pictures so we could take 'em. We took pictures.

(29) Sheila (b. 1979)

S: She gave it all to us. An' then we had, yeah then we had walked aroun' Springville explorin' everything. We had got paper an' put it on the graves an' scratched it. An' we had went all over Springville pickin' up rocks an' uh, grass. We went all to the graveyard an' everything.

FW: Huh. Where's the graveyard?

S: Right down there.

FW: Oh that's right. Down there. That's right.

S: We had went to Bonnie house. Took pictures of that an' Miss Loretta house.

The data from Springville suggest that as speakers reanalyze the function of *had* + past, the frequency of its use as a past tense form increases. Figure 4 illustrates this phenomenon for the most advanced Springville speakers. The data also show that the diffusion of innovative *had* + past and the semantic reanalysis of this form have been a gradual process, with the 'traditional' past perfect (realized as *had* + past in the youngest generations) coexisting with the reanalyzed form in all speakers (cf. Lichtenberk 1991 on the coexistence of forms during grammaticalization). Further, the data from the youngest speakers also suggest that as innovative *had* + past continues to spread throughout discourse contexts, it does so at the expense of the older, traditional past perfect, so that innovative *had* + past occurs in environments where previously only the simple past would be used (i.e., listing). This situation is exactly parallel to the situation described earlier with deleted *would*, where as *be₂* expands, the invariant *be* that results from *would* deletion disappears.

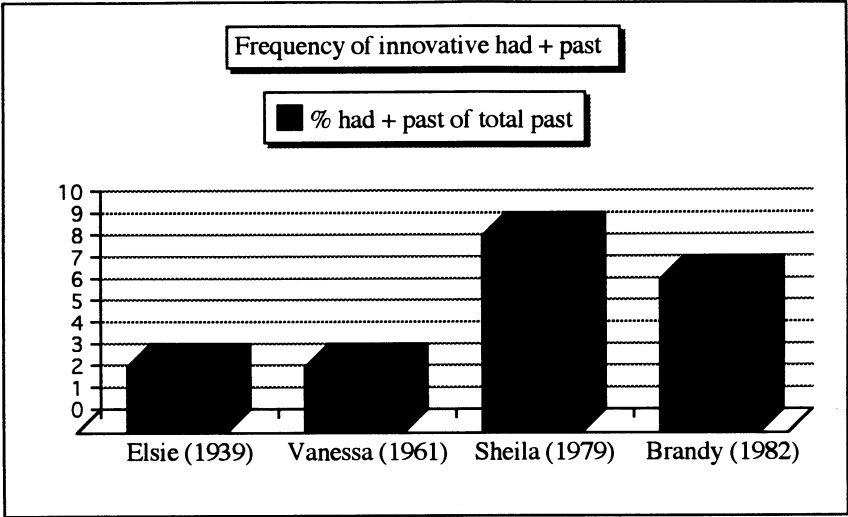


Figure 4. Frequency of Innovative *had + past* for the Most Advanced Springville Speakers

The discourse distribution of innovative *had + past* illustrated in Table 1 suggests that as the usage of this form moves through discourse contexts, it becomes more foregrounded, especially in the speech of the Post-1970 generation. Figure 5 illustrates a continuum for the use of innovative *had + past* as its discourse function shifts from expressing traditional backgrounded events to backgrounded and foregrounded events in narratives, as this form begins to grammaticalize over time in the speech of Springville residents:

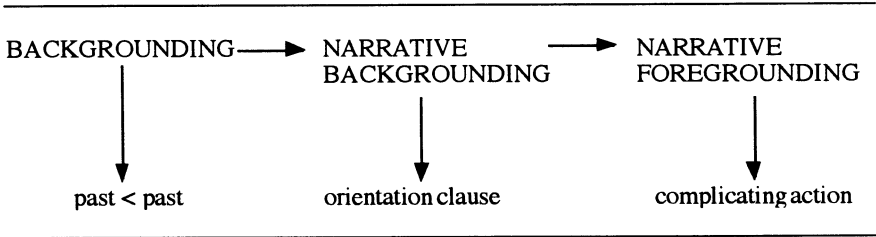


Figure 5. Grounding Continuum for Innovative *had + past* in Springville Speech

The expansion of innovative *had + past* into non-narrative contexts represents the further grammaticalization of this form. This is shown in Figure 6 which illustrates the complete path of grammaticalization as *had + past* is semantically and grammatically reanalyzed for Springville speakers:

Narrative Contexts			Non-Narrative Contexts	
Backgrounded	>	Foregrounded		
orientation clause	>	sequencing of past events	>	single events > unsequenced listing

Figure 6. Grammaticalization Path of *had* + past for Springville Speakers

For the oldest generation of Springville speakers and the former slaves, *had* + past is only used to express backgrounded events, in other words past before past. Among the next generation of *had* + past expands to a new environment within the same backgrounded speech context. In other words, *had* + past becomes an option to express not only past before past events, but also to express backgrounded events in a narrative, hence its use in orientation clauses. As an explicit past reference point is lost in conjunction with the use of innovative *had* + past in orientation clauses of narratives, the probability that speakers will begin to use this form to express more foregrounded events within the same speech event increases. Thus *had* + past expands into the complicating action clauses of narratives, the next stage along the grammaticalization path of this form. Because speakers freely use *had* + past with time adverbials to express single foregrounded events within narratives, we can posit an easy transition for its use outside of narratives to express single past events. This would be the next stage as *had* + past grammaticalizes. The final stage in the grammaticalization path of *had* + past represented in the Springville data is its use for the listing of unsequenced past events. The expansion of *had* + past to this context is best understood in light of the fact that unsequenced listings are no more than a series of single past events.

4.0 Conclusion

Although most work on grammaticalization relies on historical documents, a growing body of work, such as Schwenter's 1994 analysis of the grammaticalization of the perfect in Alicante Spanish, is beginning to look at grammaticalization in progress. As this analysis of *be*₂ and innovative *had* + past suggests, quantitative sociolinguistics provides an extremely useful methodology for studying grammaticalization as it is taking place. The linking of sociolinguistic methodology with the substantive and theoretical insights of work on grammaticalization creates an exciting opportunity for research that not only tracks grammatical change but also explores the motivations for it.

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² For a more detailed explanation of our field methods and interview contexts see Cukor-Avila and Bailey (under review) and Cukor-Avila (1995).

³ It is interesting to note here that we have three tokens of *be*₂ (*be*+V+ing) with habitual meaning among our elderly adults. In spite of the fact that none of the tokens can plausibly be derived from *would* deletion, all of them have past reference. They seem to reflect a kind of transitional stage from the invariant *be* that derives from *would* deletion to the *be*₂ of contemporary urban AAVE.

⁴ The authors wish to thank Kathy Carey whose insights about semantic change and grammaticalization processes and intuitive suggestions about the *had* + past data are greatly appreciated.

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